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Antecedents of Deviant Responses: Predicting from a General Theory of Deviant Behavior

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A statement of a general theory of deviant behavior asserts that four factors or processes intervene between the development of self-rejecting attitudes and adoption of deviant patterns. An earlier report demonstrated a relationship between antecedent negative self-attitudes and subsequent increases in seven variables that reflected these four factors. The present paper tests hypotheses that these seven variables are in turn related to the subsequent adoption of each of 22 deviant responses. Subjects were seventh-grade students (N = 4694) who responded to questionnaires at T₁ and T₂ (a year later). The seven independent variables were measured by scale scores based on subject responses at T₁. Adoption of deviant responses was defined in terms of subject's self-reports of performing each of 22 deviant acts between T₁ and T₂ after having denied performance of the deviant act during a specified period prior to T₁. The results were interpreted as supporting the hypotheses, although relatively few exceptions were noted. These findings together with those of the earlier analysis were thus congruent with the theoretical position that the relationship between antecedent self-rejection and subsequent deviant responses is mediated by the subjective association of membership group experiences with feelings of self-rejection, the genesis of contranormative attitudes, the inability to satisfy the self-esteem motive through normative response patterns, and awareness of deviant alternatives to these normative patterns that in the past have failed to permit development of self-accepting attitudes.

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INTRODUCTION

According to a recent statement of a general theory of deviant behavior (Kaplan, 1975a) based on the postulate of the self-esteem motive as a characteristically human motive, a person's adoption of any of a range of deviant responses is the consequence of the earlier development of intensely distressful negative self-attitudes in the course of his membership group experiences. The relationship is mediated by processes through which the person (1) comes to subjectively associate his membership group experiences with the genesis of the intrinsically distressful negative self-feelings, (2) develops contranormative attitudes, (3) continues to experience frustration of the self-esteem motive, and (4) seeks and becomes aware of deviant alternatives to the normative patterns that in the past have failed to permit the development of self-accepting attitudes.

Earlier reports from a longitudinal study designed to test aspects of the general theory in addition to providing data compatible with the postulate of the self-esteem motive (Kaplan, 1975b) support the assertion that self-derogation is the consequence of the inability to defend against self-devaluing implications of membership group experiences (Kaplan, 1976a), the hypothesis that the adoption of diverse deviant responses is associated with the genesis of negative self-attitudes (Kaplan, 1975c, 1976b, 1976c), and the proposed relationship between self-derogation and the factors noted above that are said to intervene between the development of self-rejecting attitudes and the adoption of deviant response patterns (Kaplan, 1975d). These relationships are indicated in Fig. 1 by solid unidirectional arrows (→).

In this last mentioned report self-derogation level was hypothesized and observed to be related to subsequent (base-free) increases in each of seven variables that variously reflect the four factors or processes said to mediate between the genesis of negative self-attitudes and the adoption of deviant responses. However, while in the previous analysis antecedent level of self-derogation was observed to be associated with subsequent base-free increases in each of the seven dependent variables under consideration, a further analysis was necessary in order to establish that the factors or processes reflected in these variables in fact mediate between antecedent negative self-attitudes and subsequent adoption of deviant responses. In addition to establishing that these processes are influenced by negative self-attitudes it is necessary to determine that they in turn influence the adoption of deviant responses. Such influences are suggested by a number of reports of associations between what may be taken as indices of deviant responses on the one hand and perception of self-devaluing experiences in membership groups (Gough and Peterson, 1952; Wahl, 1956; Reed and Cuadra, 1957; Dentler and Monroe, 1961; Deitz, 1969), attitudes toward contra-normative/normative patterns (Dinitz *et al.*, 1962; Short *et al.*, 1965; Scarpitti, 1965; Ganzler, 1967; Suchman, 1968; Smart and Fejer, 1969; Kohn and Mercer, 1971), and a number of factors (such as anxiety, denial, and low ego strength)

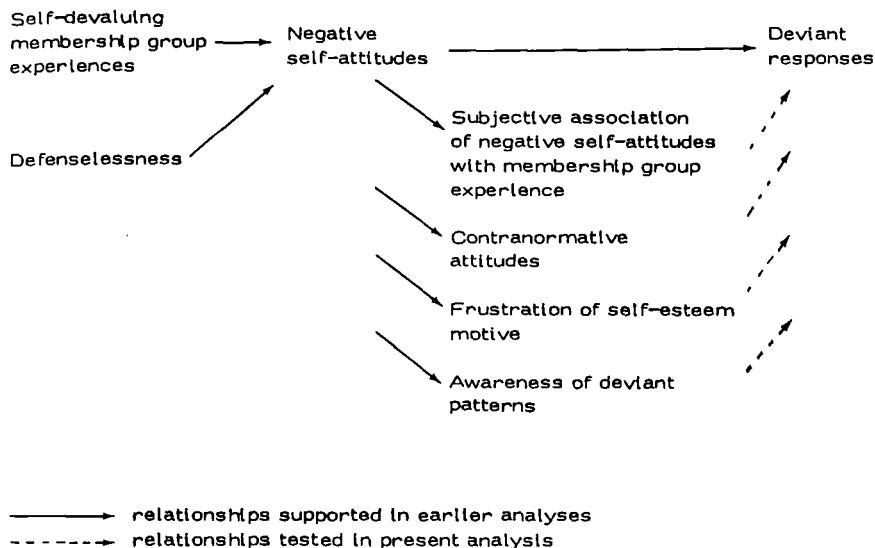


Fig. 1. Path diagram of relationships asserted in a general theory of deviant behavior (Kaplan, 1975a).

suggesting exacerbation of the self-esteem motive (Washburn, 1963; Miller, 1968; Whitelock *et al.*, 1971), on the other hand. Nevertheless, these studies in general do not permit the demonstration of temporal sequences between these latter variables and the subsequent adoption of deviant responses. It is to investigate the existence of such relationships (indicated by broken unidirectional arrows in Fig. 1) that the present investigation was undertaken.

HYPOTHESES

For each of seven variables reflecting one of the processes said to mediate between the genesis of negative self-attitudes and subsequent deviant responses it is hypothesized that subjects who score high relative to those who score low on the variable at a given point in time will be significantly more likely subsequently to adopt each of 22 virtually uncorrelated deviant response patterns.

METHOD

The seven hypotheses were tested using data collected in the course of a longitudinal survey of junior high school students.

Sample and Data Collection

The target sample was all of the seventh-grade students in 18 (randomly selected) of the 36 junior high schools in the Houston Independent School District as of March 1971. The students who were to take the test at a particular school generally were convened at one or two common locations (lunchroom or auditorium) during the morning of a school day, where they responded to a 209-item structured self-administered questionnaire. The test was administered three times, at annual intervals, during March or April of 1971 (T_1), 1972 (T_2), and 1973 (T_3).

Of the 9459 seventh-grade students in the selected schools, 7618 (80%) returned questionnaires that were usable in the longitudinal analysis. Of these 7618 students, 4694 (61.6%) provided usable questionnaires at the time of the second administration. The hypotheses under consideration were tested using data provided by these students who were present at both test administrations.

As reported in an earlier paper (Kaplan, 1976b) an examination of subject characteristics associated with sample attrition revealed that those who discontinued participation in the study were appreciably and significantly more likely to have reported prior performance of deviant acts. However, these subjects would have been excluded from the analysis in any event since the present study investigates factors associated with the *adoption* of deviant responses among subjects who presumably had not previously adopted such responses.

Operational Definitions

The seven independent variables and the dependent variables are defined as follows.

Independent Variables

The seven independent variables variously reflected one or another of the four factors said to mediate the relationship between antecedent negative self-attitudes and the subsequent adoption of deviant responses. The *first* factor (perceived association between negative self-attitudes and membership group experiences) was reflected in perceived self-devaluing experiences in a peer group, i.e., "the kids at school" (hypothesis 1), perceived self-devaluing experiences in the family (hypothesis 2), and perceived self-devaluing experiences in the school (hypothesis 3). The *second* factor (investment of the normative structure with negative, and the contranormative structure with positive affect) was reflected in a measure of the tendency to devalue the normative structure and to positively value contranormative patterns as potential sources of gratification (hypothesis 4). The *third* factor (frustration of the self-esteem motive)

was reflected in measures of defenselessness, that is, experience of subjective distress associated with a vulnerability to self-devaluing circumstances (hypothesis 5) and the need to avoid judgment of personal responsibility for self-devaluing circumstances (hypothesis 6). The *fourth* factor (awareness of deviant patterns) was reflected in a face-valid measure of acquaintance with the prevalence of the deviant responses among peers (hypothesis 7).

Operational definitions of these variables (as continuous dependent variables) were described in an earlier publication (Kaplan, 1975d). However, for the convenience of the reader the items comprising the measures are appended to the text. The number of affirmative responses that determine low, medium (in the case of the measure of contranormative attitudes), and high categories were selected so as to divide the distribution of scores for each variable into as nearly equal parts as possible.

Dependent Variables (Adoption of Deviant Responses)

Deviant responses were indicated by self-reports of the 22 acts listed in Table I. At the first test administration the students were asked to indicate whether or not they performed the deviant behavior in question during a specified period prior to the test. The specified period in question was "within 1 month" for all of the items except the following, where the time period is as indicated parenthetically: 26 (during the last 9-week period), 28 (within the last week), and 29 (during the last exam period). At the second and third testing, the time reference was "within the last year" except for item 28, which retained the same ("within the last week") time reference. Reasons for selecting these time periods as well as data relating to validation of the self-report data are presented in an earlier publication (Kaplan, 1976b).

The *adoption* of deviant responses was said to have occurred if subjects who reported *not* performing the act prior to the first testing (T_1) did report at the time of the second testing (T_2) performing the act during the period between T_1 and T_2 . Although it is possible that the person might have performed the act prior to the specified period preceding T_1 it is argued that the probability is greater that the student had not yet adopted the response if he indicated prior nonperformance of the act in question than if he indicated prior performance.

Conversely a person was described as not having adopted the deviant response if he denied performing the response both during the specified period prior to T_1 and during the period between T_1 and T_2 .

Analysis

The hypotheses were tested according to the following procedure. For each of the seven independent variable subjects who were in the high (in the

Table I. Adoption of Deviant Responses Between T_1 and T_2 by High and Low Values on Independent Variables at T_1 Among Students Who Deny Performance of the Deviant Response During Specified Periods Prior to T_1

	Perceived self-devaluing experiences among kids at school				Perceived self-devaluing experiences in family				Perceived self-devaluing experiences in school				Devaluation of normative structure (contranormative attitudes)				Defenselessness/vulnerability				Avoidance of personal responsibility for self-devaluing circumstances				Awareness of deviant response patterns			
	low	high	low	high	low	high	low	high	low	high	low	high	low	med.	high	low	high	low	high	low	high	low	high	low	high	low	high	
3 ^a Took things worth between \$2 and \$50	10 ^b	11	***c8	14	***c8	14	***8	16	***8	16	***7	12	14	***7	12	***9	12	***9	12	***8	14							
7 Took things worth less than \$2	22	21	***18	26	***18	26	***19	27	***19	27	**19	23	24	**19	23	**20	24	**20	24	**19	24							
10 Thought about or threatened to take own life	***12	16	***11	19	***11	19	***12	21	***12	21	**11	15	20	**11	15	**10	20	**10	19	**12	17							
14 Became angry and broke things	***22	28	***21	32	***21	32	***23	32	***23	32	***20	26	32	***20	26	***20	32	***21	31	***22	30							
17 Carried a razor, switchblade, or gun as a weapon	***8	11	***7	13	***7	13	***7	16	***7	16	***6	10	14	***6	10	9	10	***7	12	***7	12							
24 Sold narcotic drugs (dope, heroin)	4	4	***2	6	***2	6	***2	8	***2	8	***2	4	6	***2	4	*4	5	***3	5	***3	6							
26 Received a failing grade in one or more school subjects	***17	22	***15	27	***15	27	***16	31	***16	31	***12	21	32	***12	21	**18	22	***14	28	**18	22							
28 Used wine, beer, or liquor more than two times	20	22	***18	25	***18	25	***18	29	***18	29	***16	22	28	***16	22	**20	23	***18	26	***18	26							

29	Cheated on exams	38	36	**34	39	**34	57	36	36	39	**33	40	**34	40	**32	41
31	Attempted suicide	***6	9	***5	11	***6	12	***5	7	13	***5	10	***4	11	***6	10
33	Started a fist fight	13	13	***11	15	***11	18	***11	13	16	12	14	***11	16	***11	15
38	Took narcotic drugs	11	11	***7	15	***8	17	***7	11	15	***9	12	***8	13	***7	15
44	Skipped school without an excuse	***16	19	***13	23	***13	27	***12	17	25	***16	20	***14	21	***14	22
50	Took part in gang fights	*7	8	***6	10	***5	12	***4	7	13	7	8	***5	10	***6	10
57	Used force to get money or valuables	***4	6	***3	7	***3	8	***2	4	9	4	6	***3	7	***4	6
61	Broke into and entered a home, store, or building	4	5	***3	6	***3	8	***3	5	6	4	5	***3	6	***3	6
64	Damaged or destroyed public or private property on purpose	**7	9	***6	10	***6	12	***5	8	12	**7	9	***6	11	***6	10
69	Stole things from someone else's desk or locker	11	14	***10	16	***10	17	***8	15	16	***10	15	***10	15	***10	16
72	Used a car without the owner's permission	6	6	***4	8	***4	9	***3	6	9	6	6	***5	7	***5	7
75	Beat up someone who did nothing to you	***5	8	***5	9	***5	11	***4	6	11	*6	8	***4	9	***5	9
78	Took things worth \$50 or more	3	4	***2	6	***2	6	***2	4	6	3	4	***2	5	***2	5
82	Smoked marijuana	15	13	***10	18	***10	21	***10	14	19	*13	15	***11	16	***10	18

^aIndicates student questionnaire items.

^bIndicates percentage of subjects adopting deviant response between T_1 and T_2 , Cell N at least 1200.

^cAsterisks indicate significant chi-square, independent variable (high vs. low) vs. self-report of deviant response at T_2 (yes vs. no), $df = 1$ in all comparisons except devaluation of normative structure where $df = 2$: * = $p < 0.05$; ** = $p < 0.01$; *** = $p < 0.001$.

case of variable four, medium) and low categories, respectively, of the independent variable in question at T_1 were compared with regard to the proportion of subjects who adopted each of the 22 deviant responses between T_1 and T_2 . Chi-square analysis was used to test the hypothesis of no relationship between the independent variable and adoption of the deviant response.

Since only subjects who denied performance of the deviant act in question prior to T_1 were considered in the analysis, it was possible to establish a temporal relationship between score category on each independent variable at T_1 and initial report of the deviant response(s) at T_2 (referring to the period T_1 – T_2).

RESULTS

The results of the analysis are summarized in Table I. For the second through the seventh independent variable the hypotheses were clearly supported. For the remaining variable (to be discussed below) the results were more equivocal.

For each of the 22 deviant responses, subjects who were high on perception of self-devaluing experiences in the family at T_1 were significantly more likely to indicate adoption of the deviant response by T_2 . Levels of significance are indicated in Table I.

For each of the 22 deviant responses, subjects who were high on self-devaluing experiences in the school at T_1 were significantly more likely to report adoption of the deviant response by T_2 .

For each of the 22 deviant responses level of contranormative attitudes at T_1 was associated with adoption of the deviant response by T_2 in the expected direction. Subjects who were high in the expression of contranormative attitudes at the earlier point in time were more likely to indicate adoption of the deviant response by the latter point in time. The relationship was statistically significant in 21 of the 22 relationships examined.

Subjects who were high relative to those who were low on defenselessness/vulnerability at T_1 were more likely by T_2 to report adoption of the deviant response in 21 of the 22 modes of deviance examined. The differences were statistically significant for 15 of the modes of deviant response.

For each of the 22 modes of deviant response under consideration subjects who were high in avoidance of personal responsibility for self-devaluing circumstances relative to those who were low on this variable at T_1 were significantly more likely to indicate subsequently (at T_2) adoption of the deviant response.

For each of the 22 deviant responses subjects who were high on the measure of awareness of deviant response patterns at T_1 relative to those who were low on the variable were significantly more likely subsequently to indicate adoption of the deviant response (at T_2).

The weakest relationship between an independent variable and subsequent adoption of deviant responses concerned the perception of self-devaluing expe-

periences among the kids at school. For 15 of the 22 deviant responses the relationship between antecedent perception of self-devaluing experiences among the kids at school and subsequent adoption of the deviant response was in the predicted direction. The relationship was statistically significant in 11 of the instances. Thus, while the earlier analysis demonstrated that antecedent self-derogation was related to subsequent increases in the identification of self-devaluing experiences with the kids at school, high levels of such a perceived association between self-devaluing experiences and the peer group did not uniformly predict adoption of deviant responses. The relationship between this variable and adoption of deviant responses was based on the reasoning that the individual would seek alternative responses to those that were associated with intrinsically distressful self-rejecting attitudes. Similar reasoning led to successful predictions with regard to antecedent perception of self-devaluing experiences in the family and school. However, after the fact, it would appear that the peer group has a dual significance with regard to the genesis of self-devaluing attitudes and the adoption of deviant responses. On the one hand, the association of self-devaluing experiences with the peer group would lead to a predisposition to behave in a deviant fashion. However, on the other hand, the adoption of many deviant responses by an adolescent depends upon his being in a peer group. Thus the alienation from the peer group in effect would exclude him from the opportunity to practice a number of group-facilitated deviant responses. When those instances of deviant responses in which the expected relationship did not obtain are examined, this tentative explanation seems plausible. Thus, selling or taking narcotic drugs, smoking marijuana, using a car without the owner's permission, and so forth, might well be considered activities that are facilitated by peer group participation. Alienation from the peer group would thus inhibit the adoption of these responses although a predisposition to deviance might still be present.

In any case, however, the relationship between antecedent self-devaluing experiences among the kids at school and subsequent adoption of deviant responses was statistically significant for half of the deviant responses considered — far more than would have been expected by chance.

Apart from the 11 instances in which peer-group devaluation was not significantly associated with adoption of deviant responses, only eight other deviations from hypothesis were noted. Contranormative attitudes was not significantly associated with subsequent cheating on exams. This might simply reflect the greater general acceptability of this pattern relative to the other "deviant" patterns. In the remaining instances defenselessness/vulnerability was not significantly associated with subsequent adoption of seven deviant responses that imply relatively great risk whether physical or otherwise (carrying a weapon, starting a fist fight, participating in gang fights, using force to get money or valuables, breaking and entering, using a car without the owner's permission, grand theft). Perhaps the lack of self-confidence implied by high defenselessness/

vulnerability mitigates the predisposition to adopt high-risk deviance patterns that would otherwise result from the inability to defend against self-devaluing experiences in one's membership groups.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present analysis (apart from the relatively few exceptions noted above) together with those from earlier analyses support the theoretical statements regarding factors said to mediate between the genesis of negative self-attitudes and the subsequent adoption of deviant responses. It appears that individuals characterized by negative self-attitudes (said to be the consequence of the subject's history of being unable to defend against self-devaluing experiences in his membership groups) come increasingly to perceive an association between their negative self-attitudes and their membership group experiences. As a result of having perceived and generalized an association between actual membership group experiences and the genesis of subjectively distressful negative self-attitudes these persons come increasingly to associate the membership group patterns with negative feelings, by virtue of which the person is said to lose motivation to conform to and acquire motivation to deviate from the normative structure. At the same time persons characterized by negative self-attitudes experience intensification of the need to enhance their self-attitudes by virtue of the continuing failure of the normative structure to provide motivationally acceptable response patterns that would serve this need. In view of the inability to satisfy the self-esteem motive through the use of now motivationally unacceptable normative response patterns, persons characterized by negative self-attitudes will seek, become aware of, and adopt alternative deviant response patterns.

It will be apparent that alternative explanations of any one of the relationships observed in this study could be presented that would fit the data equally well. However, it is unlikely that any one of these explanations would be as compatible with the total pattern of relationships observed in the earlier analysis and in the present study as well as the theoretical statement under consideration to the effect that the development of negative self-attitudes in the course of membership group experiences influences deviant patterns by leading to the experience of conformity to membership group patterns as intrinsically distressing, and by influencing the person's need to seek alternatives to the now intrinsically disvalued normative patterns in order to satisfy the self-esteem motive.

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APPENDIX

Items Comprising Seven Independent Variable Measures

1. Perception of self-devaluing experiences in peer group (0 = low, 1 or more = high).

More often than not I feel put down by the kids at school.

I am not very good at the kinds of things the kids at school think are important.

The kids at school are usually not very interested in what I say or do.
Most of the kids at school do not like me very much.

2. Perception of self-devaluing experiences in family (0 = low, 1 or more = high).

My parents hardly ever trust me to do something on my own.

At home I have been more unhappy than happy.

My family can't give me the chance to succeed that most kids have.

I would like to leave home.

As long as I can remember my parents have put me down.

My parents are usually not very interested in what I say or do.

My parents do not like me very much.

3. Perception of self-devaluing experiences in school (0-1 = low, 2 or more = high).

Would like to quit school as soon as possible?

My teachers are usually not very interested in what I say or do.

By my teachers' standards I am a failure.

My teachers do not like me very much.

I have never been very happy in school.

I probably will not go to college and graduate.

My teachers usually put me down.

4. Devaluation of normative structure and positive valuation of contranormative patterns (0-1 = low, 2 or 3 = medium, 4 or more = high).

I have a better chance of doing well if I cut corners than if I play it straight.

The kids who mess up with the law seem to be better off than those who play it straight.

There isn't much chance that a kid from my neighborhood will ever get ahead.

If you want people to like you you have to tell them what they want to hear even if it isn't the truth.

Most of the adults I know got what is important out of life without getting an education.

If you stick to law and order you will never fix what is wrong with this country.

As long as I stay with the straight life I will never make it.

The law is always against the ordinary guy.

A smart lawyer can usually get a criminal free.

I have never been able to accomplish as much as my family wanted me to.

I would like to take a more active part in social protest groups.

5. Defenselessness/vulnerability (0-5 = low, 6 or more = high).

Are you often bothered by nervousness?

Do you often get angry, annoyed or upset?

Do you often feel downcast and dejected?

Do you often have difficulty keeping your mind on things?

Do you have a lot of accidents?

Do you often have trouble sitting still for a long time?

Do you become deeply disturbed when someone laughs at you or blames you for something you have done wrong?

When my parents dislike something I do it bothers me very much.

When the kids at school dislike something I do it bothers me very much.

I get nervous when things aren't just right.

I spend a lot of time daydreaming.

When my teachers dislike something I do it bothers me very much.

6. Need to avoid personal responsibility for self-devaluing circumstances (0-3 = low, 4 or more = high).

Are most of your friends older than you?

Do you often lose track of what you were thinking?

Do you tell lies often?

Do you try to avoid situations in which you have to compete with others?

It's mostly luck if one succeeds or fails.

You can do very little to change your life.

If someone insulted me I would probably avoid talking to him in the future.

When I do something wrong, it's almost like it's someone else who is doing it, not me.

Often I feel that I don't have enough control over the direction my life is taking.

I don't care much about other people's feelings.

People often talk about me behind my back.

7. Awareness of deviant response patterns (0-3 = low, 4 or more = high).

Do many of the kids at school take an active part in social protest either at school or outside of school?

Do many of the kids at school take narcotic drugs?

Do many of the kids at school damage or destroy public or private property on purpose that doesn't belong to them?

Do many of the kids at school break into and enter a home, store, or building?

Do many of the kids at school carry razors, switchblades, or guns as weapons?

Do many of the kids at school take little things (worth less than \$2) that don't belong to them?

Do many of the kids at school beat up on people who have not done anything to them?

Do many of the kids at school smoke marijuana?